

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks at a Thanksgiving Meal With Servicemembers and Military Families at Naval Station Norfolk, Virginia

November 19, 2023

The First Lady. Well, happy Thanksgiving.

I'm sorry that I have to lead this off with a sad announcement. Our former First Lady Rosalynn Carter has just passed. And she was well known for her efforts on mental health and caregiving and women's rights. So I hope that during the holidays, you'll consider saying your—include the Carter family in your prayers.

When our son Beau was deployed, we saw how much his children missed their daddy. And I know how many in this room are living with an empty chair at your table right now. Or maybe you're stationed far from your family, and your table is a little smaller this year.

You and your families sacrifice so much in times of war and peace. And it's our duty and honor to make sure that you feel supported.

That's what my Joining Forces initiative—my White House initiative supports: military and veterans' spouses, caregivers, and survivors. So that's what I started several years ago with Michelle Obama, and we have continued that on.

And it's why we join military families for "Friendsgiving" year after year. Thank you to the Robert Irvine Foundation and the USO for making this possible.

We hope you can wrap yourselves in the love and community that surrounds you. Because family is more than parents and partners. It's the people in this room, the bonds we forge, and the families we create together.

Now I'll turn it over to Navy veteran and Norfolk Navy spouse, Sibrina Sears.

Sibrina.

Military spouse Sibrina Sears. Thank you. Thank you.

Good afternoon. I am Sibrina Sears. I am one of the many people with a spouse deployed on the *Eisenhower*. I have been married to my wonderful husband, ABEC Shannon Sears, for almost 9 years now, and we have five beautiful daughters.

Before becoming a military spouse, I was Active Duty. And before that, I was a Navy brat. I can say that I've experienced this life from every perspective, and it is not hard. Being away from family and just put in a new place is not easy, but one thing I can say that makes it easier is this military community and events like these that help us—help bring us together and let us know that we are not forgotten and we are still important.

Now it's my honor and privilege to introduce to you the President of the United States of America, President Joe Biden.

The President. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Please, everybody, sit down. You don't have to be standing.

Thank you all so very much.

You know, I've been saying for a long, long time, we only—we have a lot of obligations as a Government. We only have one truly sacred obligation, and that's to prepare those who we send

into harm's way, care for them and their families when they come home, and make sure they're never forgotten.

You literally are—it's not hyperbole to say, you literally are—the backbone, the spine, the sinew of this Nation. Only 1 percent of you—and it's important to keep mind—1 percent of you—that's all—that protects the 99 percent of us. One percent. And the sacrifices you make—not just those who are in uniform, but those who are not in uniform.

You know, there's that famous poet—an English poet who said, "They also serve"—Chaplain—"who also only stand and wait."

I watched, for the year our son was in Iraq as a major in the United States Army—if you excuse the reference to the Army—[*laughter*]*—in the Army. And I watched every morning that—when I was home with Jill. She'd be up in the morning, and she'd be standing on the way to teach school. And she'd be standing there with a cup of coffee over the sink, and you could see her mouthing a prayer that one of her—one of the generals—National Guard generals had—wife had given her. Every day.*

And it's hard looking at that empty table, that empty chair, especially for holidays. It's hard watching it. And many of you were right here when you—not long ago when you sent your—your troops off, your family off. But you know, they're incredible.

Everywhere I go—and I've been to over 140 nations—everywhere I go in my career, no one misunderstands that we have the finest military in the world—not a joke. We have the finest military in the world. And that's not just because of their fighting ability, which is undisputed, but the way—

[At this point, a child in the audience cried out.]

That's okay. You're allowed—she's allowed. In my family, kids rule. [*Laughter*] So she can holler, she can scream, do whatever she wants to do.

But look, I mean it from the bottom of my heart. You know, you family members, you are the heart of this operation. You really are. Not a joke. So thank you, thank you, thank you.

And like I said, like Jill said, you know, for the—for the year after our son came home from Kosovo and then headed off to Iraq for a year as an Army major, I watched his kids every day. And you know, anyway, I won't get talking about that.

But it's just—it's just not easy for you all. So thank you, thank you, thank you.

And as I said—you know, there's a—John Milton, English poet—and I'll end with this—said, "They also serve who only stand and wait." "They also serve who only stand and wait." And that's what you do. So thank you, thank you, thank you.

And I love your ears. I love them. They're really cool. What's your name?

Military child Catherine Garcia. Catherine.

The President. Catherine. What a beautiful name. That's my mommy's name. Well, nice to see—how old are you? Seventeen?

Child. No, she's 6.

The President. Six. And how old are you? Fifteen?

Child. Four.

The President. Four? You're a pretty big guy. [*Laughter*]

Well, I tell you what. Be nice to your sister. You're going to need her someday. At least, I did.

Anyway, thank you all so very much. And if I—I get to give you the dressing. And if you don't like dressing, just come up and pretend to do and say hi to me. Okay? [*Laughter*]

Thank you all very much. And happy Thanksgiving. May God love you all. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Now I'm going to introduce the Chaplain. Chaplain, thank you. Appreciate it.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 4:04 p.m. at the Helicopter Mine Countermeasure Squadron 15 Hanger. In his remarks, he referred to Capt. Brian J. Stamm, USN, fleet chaplain, U.S. Fleet Forces Command; and Maj. Gen. Francis D. Vavala (Ret.), former adjutant general, Delaware National Guard, and his wife Jane. The First Lady referred to her grandchildren Natalie and R. Hunter Biden; and former First Lady Michelle Obama. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on November 20.

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